

VZCZCXRO0737
PP RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHCHI #0074/01 1310637
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 110637Z MAY 06
FM AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0185
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK PRIORITY 0467
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 0022
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU PRIORITY 0028
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI PRIORITY 0215
RUEHGZ/AMCONSUL GUANGZHOU PRIORITY 0015
RUEHGH/AMCONSUL SHANGHAI PRIORITY 0015
RUEHSH/AMCONSUL SHENYANG PRIORITY 0013
RUEHIN/AIT TAIPEI PRIORITY 0013

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000074

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [SCUL](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TH](#) [CH](#)

SUBJECT: CHIANG RAI PROVINCE PUSHES CHINESE LANGUAGE PROMOTION

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¶1. Summary. As the Thai province closest to China and a historical center for former Kuomintang forces, Chiang Rai has long had schools - often unofficial ones - teaching Chinese language. Building on this heritage, the province is striving to position itself as a center of Chinese language learning, with support both from the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan. More and more schools and universities in the region are adding Chinese programs to meet parent and student demand, although English remains the most popular foreign language. End summary.

¶2. With business and family ties to nearby China, Chiang Rai is actively encouraging Chinese learning and use as part of its "Provincial Economic Strategic Plan." Business people trading with China are the biggest promoters behind this development. According to prominent Chiang Rai businessman Anan Laothammatas, Chinese traders want to communicate with Thai traders directly, making Chinese language skills a crucial part of doing business in the Mekong region.

¶3. Official promotion, parental aspirations and actual practice are not in complete accord, however, as Anan admitted that his own children attend a prestigious Thai school in Bangkok. His brother, former Mahachon party leader Anek Laothammatas, sends his children to a tri-lingual Thai, English and Chinese school in Bangkok but intends them to pursue higher education in the U.S. Nevertheless, a growing number of schools in northern Thailand are opening Chinese language classes and scrambling to recruit scarce Chinese-qualified teachers to meet parental demand.

KMT villages turn to tourism

¶4. Chiang Rai municipality, a sister city of Yunnan's Jinghong, erected street signs in Chinese as well as Thai and English in 2002; the leaders of the Chamber of Commerce, many from southern Chinese roots, have learned Mandarin for business purposes. Areas such as Mae Salong, where Chinese Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) communities settled in 1961, are now "tourism villages"; bus loads of tourists from Taiwan come to buy tea and visit the KMT Martyrs Memorial while Thai tourists enjoy Yunnanese food and mountain temperatures.

¶5. The provincial education office is completing a year-long effort to develop Chinese language text books for schools in

Chiang Rai. The local office receives no support from the Thai Ministry of Education (MOE), which, despite official pronouncements promoting Chinese language learning, is just starting to develop curricular materials. Until the end of the communist insurgency in the early 1980s, the MOE monitored schools teaching Chinese because of national security concerns. Today the same ministry is promoting Chinese as the second most important foreign language for Thai students.

¶6. Both Taiwan and the PRC assist schools and curriculum in the province. Schools in the Mae Sai, Mae Fah Luang, Mae Chan, and Chiang Saen areas with traditional KMT connections receive support from Taiwan while higher educational institutes such as Mae Fah Luang University (MFLU) and Chiang Rai Rajabhat University look to the PRC for assistance and partnership. MFLU received US \$1.5 million from the PRC several years ago to build the Sirindhorn Chinese Language and Cultural Center on campus.

Using Confucius to market Chinese language and culture

¶7. Chinese Consul Jin Yilin told the Consul General that MFLU recently signed an agreement with Xiamen University to establish a Confucius Institute, one of approximately 50 worldwide and an expected three in Thailand promoting Chinese language and culture. She predicted that the MFLU institute will open before another Confucius Institute planned at Chiang Mai University with Yunnan Normal University because "we gave MFLU a lot of money when I was Thai desk officer."

¶8. The growing popularity of Chinese language has led to MOE efforts to increase funding and exert greater control, although the shortage of qualified teachers remains an obstacle. The Thai government is particularly interested in remote schools located in former KMT villages that were long neglected by Thai authorities and still use textbooks and teachers from Taiwan. In an effort to standardize the curriculum, the Ministry is now

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developing 12 Chinese language texts in cooperation with Yunnan Normal University.

¶9. Although support from the PRC usually takes the form of university-to-university agreements, the two governments are also co-funding a program to send Thai teachers for refresher training in China. However, a Chinese offer to increase the number of training slots to 1,000 per year has highlighted the human resource shortage, as the MOE worries where it will find this many Thai teachers of Chinese.

¶10. Comment. Chiang Rai has proclaimed itself a gateway to the Greater Mekong Subregion and made Chinese language teaching a priority for local schools. Unregistered schools once considered illegal are now being asked to prepare textbooks for teaching Chinese, giving the program in Thailand's northernmost province a reason to flaunt the Chinese connections that once made the province suspect on national security grounds. Despite this local boosterism, however, a lack of qualified teachers and the still-greater appeal of English suggest Chinese will remain the second most popular foreign language in the foreseeable future.

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